

*“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 3But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*5“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 6But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*16“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

We're back. We are back to Ash Wednesday. Same lessons, same confession, same hopes that this year we'll get it right - even most of the same hymns.

Yes, we're back.

The Lord is still calling, “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Joel is still echoing, “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

Once more we will hear them call and look over our days and deeds, and turn in a new direction. We will feel sorry for the mess we have made especially for the people we have hurt - the ones we could have helped but didn't - the ones who counted on us and were disappointed. Once more there is no excuse for what we have done.

Once more we will stop and realize that the sins against our neighbors are also sins against God - God who has been so good to us, and loved us, we have disappointed, deeply disappointed.

But then we hear Paul urge, “Be reconciled to God.”

Now.

Whatever is a barrier needs to be dealt with now. Whatever in our life we are holding back, or holding on to, whatever in our life that has been worshiped more than God, or trusted more than God, or served more than God needs to be put aside. Now is the time for God to be enthroned, right here in our heart.

That is the point Jesus makes also. Our practice of the faith is not a matter of rituals we perform, but is a matter of the heart.

When we give to the poor, it is not a matter of doing our required ten per cent, as if we could pay the monthly rent with God. Our benevolence is not about looking good, doing better than someone else. Our giving is to be an outward sign of the love that is within, in our hearts where only God can see. If what we give does not match an inner love it counts for nothing.

And our prayers: Jesus said it is not the words, their number, their beauty, not the words that count, but that we truly speak to God, from our heart that we truly speak to God.

And the same is true with our sorrow over sin. In Jesus' day that sorrow was shown by looking awful. And people would say, "See his repentance." But God is looking into the heart.

And so once again we are gathered to get our treasure in the right place. For we know that clothing and cars and honors do not mean much with God, but hearts in which there is love do. Looking religious does not much impress God, true humility and awe before God do.

All of that is why we are back. But will it do any good? I don't think so. If all of our trying harder was effective, we would not have to do this over and over.

But we forget. We keep thinking, "Maybe I did not try hard enough."

So we are back. Maybe this year something different will happen. Maybe we will forget for a moment what we are doing to see what Jesus is doing.

Jesus is looking at you in love. Jesus is looking at you with a love that has walked through suffering and death and hell for you. Once you see his look, you know you have no other treasure.

That is why we gather, so that we might hear the love of Jesus for us. For when we know that love, then God owns our heart and our life. Amen.